



# Simmel and Shakespeare on Lying and Love

Cultural Sociology  
2021, Vol. 15(3) 346–363  
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DOI: 10.1177/11749975520987064  
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**Andrew Balmer**

University of Manchester, UK

**Michael Durrant**

Bangor University, UK

## Abstract

This article contributes to the development of the sociology of lying by exploring some of the earliest comments on the topic, which are to be found amongst Georg Simmel's writings about secrecy. We outline Simmel's broader approach to interaction, as an experience that is conditioned upon non-knowledge, and work towards the attribution to him of the discovery of an aesthetic of concealment and revelation. This, we argue, can be used as a founding block in the sociology of lying. We then examine what Simmel has to say about lying specifically and find he falls into contradiction as he tries to link lying to other social forms, such as love, and to the shifting patterns of life which he understood to define modernity. To refine his approach, we look back to the period of early modernity during which questions of self-revelation and concealment are being explored in literature and lived uncertainly. Specifically, we take a detailed look at William Shakespeare's Sonnet 138, for it clearly articulates the complex, relational dynamics of lying and love and allows us to read this back into Simmel's account and explain why he falls into confusion. We then conclude by posing a series of questions and taking the position that sociologists should study lying as a relational phenomenon.

## Keywords

Literature, love, lying, romance, secrecy, Shakespeare, Simmel

## Introduction

Sociology has been curiously reluctant to delve into lying as a topic of study, given its prevalence in the social world. In this article we seek to contribute to the sociology of lying by returning to one of the key figures in the discipline's birth, Georg Simmel, for it

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### Corresponding author:

Dr Andrew Balmer, Department of Sociology and Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives,  
University of Manchester, Arthur Lewis Building, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK.  
Email: [andrew.balmer@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.balmer@manchester.ac.uk)

is in his work that the earliest developed account of lying as a social phenomenon can be found. When examining Simmel's analysis, we begin with his broader approach to interaction, as an experience that is conditioned upon non-knowledge, and work towards the attribution to him of the discovery of an aesthetic of concealment. This, we argue, can be used as a founding block in the renewal of a sociology of lying. Simmel goes on to examine lying as a shifting social form that is bound up with various other social forms, and which is transformed by changes occurring in modernity. But, as we will demonstrate, his analysis of lying is far too sweeping when it comes to social change, and he becomes confused as he tries to develop his exploration of lying with respect to other social forms. Our focus is on how Simmel links lying with romantic relationships. Love, we will show, leads him to art, and these phenomena, in combination, lead him astray from his own compelling ontological analysis of concealment and self-revelation.

Although lying is at the centre of various political, technological, and social concerns today, we develop our critique by turning instead to the past in order to discover what we can learn from the early modern period (c.1500–1700), a time in which many of those things remain nascent or uncertain which Simmel later sees accomplished and fatalistically accelerating beyond our control. This helps us to see how it is that Simmel comes to hold the position on lying and love that he develops. In exploring how we can understand lying and truth through art and love, Simmel affords us the opportunity to look to artists whose work has been concerned with these issues in exploration of his claim. We do this primarily by seeing how that figure so emblematic of the early modern, Shakespeare (1564–1616), navigated the relationship between these phenomena, and draw him into dialogue with Simmel, for it is in their differences that we can piece together a powerful approach to lies which might be applied to current concerns and to a range of problems in sociology more broadly.

We focus on the English sonnet as one key art form of the early modern and one of the main mediums through which Shakespeare explored questions of truth and lies, love and art. A sonnet is a poem of 14 iambic pentameter lines, rhyming, with some exceptions, *abab cdcd efef gg*. Shakespeare's Sonnet 138 is especially useful in developing a critique of Simmel, because it is explicitly concerned with love and lying, and – by being situated within the entire sonnet sequence – with the question of what art forms such as love poems can and cannot express. By bringing Simmel into dialogue with Shakespeare's sonnet we reach a conclusion about how to adjust Simmel's approach to lying to better fit his stronger sociological points and let go of his more sweeping and misguided attempts to diagnose lying within social change.

The article is built through an interdisciplinary dialogue between sociological theory (predominantly a close reading of Simmel's key works on lying, secrecy and secret societies) and literary-historical scholarship on the early modern period. We read the sonnet as a kind of social theory in itself, with its own view on lying and love, which places our article in line with recent efforts in this journal towards creating a more mutualistic approach to sociological engagements with literature (Barnwell, 2015; Vaña, 2020).

## Sociology of Lying

Compared to other similar social phenomena (such as secrecy, for instance), there is relatively little sociological work on lying (Balmer, 2018). Indeed, the overwhelming

majority of studies in the humanities on lying has been conducted in philosophy where it appears predominantly as a problem for philosophers of morality and language. Although it has been a peripheral issue (compared with truth's centrality), it has nonetheless been considered in the works of most major figures in the western philosophical canon.

In philosophy, lying is near-universally considered to be morally bad. St Augustine (see Augustine, 1887) found duplicity fundamentally sinful, for it separated people from the God-given gift of truth. Kant (see Mahon, 2006) appears to have felt lying was so damaging to trust in social order that we should rather tell the truth and imperil ourselves and others than use lies. In contemporary accounts, philosophers continue to find ways in which liars can be indicted for their lack of moral fibre and tend towards understanding lying as something that is antithetical to social norms of truthfulness and clarity (see, for example, Carson, 2010; or Fallis, 2009).

Sociologists by contrast have been less willing to see lies as purely bad, but there is not a lot of sociological work to go on. Here we review what there is and draw out some key themes. Barnes (1994) noted the lack of sociological interest in lying a couple of decades ago, and set himself the task of bringing together various scant snippets of socially informed thinking on lies from psychology, anthropology, politics and other disciplines. His review of these materials contributed to the sociology of lying most especially in the cross-cultural, comparative dimension, where he shows that anthropology in particular has helped to evidence how what we deem to count as a lie varies from culture to culture, not only from one linguistic community to another, but also possibly across lines of inequality, suggesting lying may differ across lines of class. From this, we see that lying must be understood in a way which takes seriously the effects of social context and change. We argue that Simmel had already initiated this approach in his efforts to understand lies from his vantage point in modernity, as he sees lies as being entangled with the shift towards urban living in the metropolis, but we show that he gets carried away with his singular view of how modern culture shapes inner experience.

The select few studies with more explicitly sociological thinking have also helped to show that lying appears to be a key part of social life, and some scholars have gone as far as to argue that lies are in fact essential to social experience in one respect or another. Meltzer (2003) argues that lying is a key phenomenon which distinguishes us from other animal species (which he claims cannot lie), seeing lies thus as a defining feature of humanity. He mostly argues in line with philosophical reasoning that lying is generally bad, because:

it would appear quite self-evident that discovered lies are likely to adversely affect trust and cooperation, especially when the lies relate to important matters. The resulting resentment, suspicion, disappointment, and sense of betrayal may subvert previously cohesive relationships, whether intimate or impersonal. (Meltzer, 2003: 72)

That being said, he does identify a few contexts in which lying might help maintain a relationship, and some situations in which we might normatively require people to lie (e.g. in political scenarios where lies might be told by appeal to the greater good). Here we have a hint that lying might be productive of social connection not simply destructive of it.

It is in Goffman's work where we find further contribution to lying in this regard. However, he very rarely used the term 'lying' himself and worked instead on information control practices, sequences of action or whole styles of performance and social display. This led him more frequently to a consideration of phenomena like secrecy, con tricks, undercover work and so forth, rather than lying *per se* (though lies were no doubt in his mind as part and parcel of these practices). For example, in his analysis of the presentation of self, Goffman (1971) outlines how groups (what he calls 'teams') control the definition of a situation partly through strategic containment of information that would otherwise discredit the definition. For instance, a market salesperson might use a shill in the crowd to try to stir up consumer interest but if the shill is outed as such, this destroys the impression being given off. Goffman saw deceptions, fibs, secrets, cons, half-truths and strategic containments everywhere he looked but, given his sensitivity to the work people do in order to maintain social organisation, he was cautious not to take too hard a moral stance on these elements of interaction. Indeed, he saw the moral question as something which we attend to as part of interaction itself. In his work on what he termed 'fabrications' or 'containments' (Goffman, 1974), where one person is kept out of the shared definition of the situation, he explored how people in everyday scenarios draw on the moral order to explain and account for these discrepant understandings of what is going on. Goffman posits that we respond to things like lies according to the moral binary of whether they are benign or exploitive, i.e. with respect to their ends, and not by some essential quality of the phenomena themselves (as has been common in philosophical work on lying). Benign fabrications are those which achieve (at least ostensibly) prosocial ends like keeping a friend in the dark about a surprise birthday party that you are organising, whereas exploitive fabrications are those which achieve antisocial ends, like keeping a romantic partner in the dark about an affair. On this axis we can take Goffman to be making claims about lying too (though indirectly) and anticipate that they might be socially productive in some fashion, or at least be taken to be so by social actors in given situations.

The sociologist who has gone furthest in the 'lying is essential' direction is Sacks (1995), whose argument that 'everybody has to lie' adopts an ethnomethodological approach to understanding how certain social interactions demand certain kinds of response. The example he takes is of conversational pairs, where sequences of talk prescribe and proscribe certain follow-up statements, most readily seen in his example of the everyday greeting 'How are you?' This question is not really a question, of course, and in fact there are only a few appropriate answers, as could be seen by breaching this norm. Suppose you walk down the street and a weak acquaintance recognises you vaguely and says, 'How are you?' whilst carrying on walking at a pace. You know very well not to stop them so as to be able to answer truthfully, no matter how awful or wonderful you might be feeling. Instead, the only appropriate answers are variations on the theme of 'I'm fine.' As such, sometimes one has to say something which is not true about one's thoughts, beliefs or experiences because social organisation demands it.

The most recent advance in thinking on lying is to be found in Shilling and Mellor's (2015) theoretical work on deception. They show that deception, in one form or another, has been embedded into various sociological theories since the discipline's inception, but as a secondary concern to some broader issue, as could be seen in the Marxist development of 'false consciousness', for instance. And they too seek to return to Simmel in order

to develop their sociological thinking. Their analysis contributes an important dimension to social theorising of lies by showing that deception is negotiated within experiences of inequality, such that some groups might need to lie in order to survive in an unjust social order. Marginalised groups in the LGBTQ community represent an excellent case in point with respect to 'the closet' and navigating their identities in different situations, learning to 'pass' in order to access resources otherwise unavailable to them.

In these pockets of literature, then, we have an outline of two key points regarding how sociologists might think about lying. First, lying must be viewed with respect to social change. Second, lying should not be assumed to be simply destructive of social order and might indeed support social organisation in at least some instances. For our interests we try to develop on both of these points by returning to Georg Simmel's thinking on lying and show that these issues are expressed in his work and that we can build from them.

## **Simmel's Sociology of Lying**

Simmel's (1858–1918) sociological and philosophical investigations were conducted in Berlin, at the turn of the 20th century, positioning him perfectly as an observer of metropolitan life in one of Europe's most enigmatic urban centres. His work is very much indebted to and reflects upon the shifting relations he observed in Germany's capital as transport, industry, government, fashion, consumerism and any number of other social forms were pulled into the turbulent storm of modernity.

Simmel's analyses of modernity and its effects are infused with the socio-psychological dimensions of life, both in relation to the group and the individual. For example, he explores how art forms (objective culture) and individual creativity (subjective culture) develop as modernity proceeds, and characteristically discerns doom in modernity's transformations, seeing the objective coming to dominate the subjective, leaving us surrounded by forms through which we might develop ourselves, but anaesthetised by their over-abundance (Simmel, 1968).

Having written about a quite astonishing number of topics, the classic interpretation of his work as a whole was thus, for some time, that he failed to build a systematic approach to social investigation. One might read him as having struggled to do so due to the very effects of modernity which he diagnosed, imbuing his writing with fragmentation and over-abundance, leaving readers unable to respond to his effervescence (Frisby, 2013). It is true that Simmel wrote in an eclectic fashion, and that this led to his reception for some time as an obtuse, flaneur type figure (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991). But in recent decades his style of expression and thinking has been celebrated. Habermas, for example, describes Simmel's approach as having risen to the challenge of the times rather than as having become a victim of them:

More than anything else, what distanced him from the academic world was Simmel's mentality, which was characterized by a sensitive awareness of the attractions typical of his times; of aesthetic innovations; of spiritual shifts of disposition and changes of orientation in the metropolitan attitudes to life; and of subpolitical transformations of inclination and barely tangible, diffuse, but treacherous phenomena of the everyday. (Habermas, 1996: 405)

And writing against his reception as a flaneur, Deena and Michael Weinstein have sought to reconceive Simmel as having pre-empted postmodernity, rendering him more a bricoleur, 'on a mission of cultural mapping, tracing the affinities and ruptures among the cultural complexes of the modern/postmodern metropolis . . . a poststructuralist before the advent of structuralism' (Weinstein and Weinstein, 2013: 65). Indeed, for our present concerns, it is Simmel's attention to the barely tangible, the affective affinities and disruptions of metropolitan experience that leads him to the consideration of everyday subjective phenomena like lying. And it is his insistence on rendering these microsocial features of experience against the expansive background of changes in objective culture which makes his thinking on lying so promising for sociological theorising.

However, despite this recovery of value in Simmel's 'sensitive', 'tracing' approach, there remains a tension in his works between his epistemological and metaphysical efforts, as even whilst he seeks to understand the specific, fragmentary and unique, he is also striving towards totality and unity in an overall view (Featherstone, 1991). So, whilst we can acknowledge the power of Simmel's eclectic approach as a critic of modernity, and even see him as a prescient observer of postmodern themes, we must also retain an awareness of his own struggle to make the singular speak to the general, the individual to the law, and thus attend to possible tensions that arise from his efforts to look in both directions at once.

These thematic, methodological, intellectual and aesthetic elements and struggles in Simmel's writing find expression in his thinking about lying. In exploring his approach to lies we engage in a close reading of his essays on secrecy, secret societies and on how society is possible. We focus our attention on those sections of his work explicitly concerned with lying, but we also adopt his more general comments on talk, and his broader investigations of concealment and secrecy, to frame and adjust his position on lies. Most importantly, we argue that Simmel's relational approach to society and its connection to inner life can be more forcefully applied to his account of lying than he managed to achieve.

One thing on which Simmel (1910) is quite clear is that we can never tell or know the whole or objective truth about someone else's inner world, nor even perhaps about our own. This is, in part, because he understands psychological processes to be chaotic, composed of 'flaring up' conceptions, 'zigzag motions', the 'whirling of images', and sequential ideas which are 'entirely unrelated to one another' (Simmel, 1950: 311), meaning that we are not at all perfect witnesses to, nor commentators on, our own inner world. Contrary to the common philosophical assertion (in research on lying) that truthful expression of our inner experience is the default conversational norm, Simmel argues that to disclose the chaotic, absurd truth of our inner life would in fact contravene the norms of sociation and the rules of conversation, making us seem mad. This is an important departure for sociological studies and moves us away from philosophical reasoning immediately.

Adding to such intersubjective opacity, Simmel argues, is the way in which our relationships are always conducted on the basis of specificity and generalisation, meaning that we have a personal picture of the people we encounter, depicting them as both unique individuals on the basis of their specific actions and expressions in our direct encounters with them, whilst we also characterise them as general types. To put this into the



language of painting, our portraits of each other are more in the tradition of Francis Bacon than they are of Rembrandt. It is this figurative style of social portraiture of the other which unavoidably informs our own selectivity and expression, painting ourselves for the other in a similarly stylised fashion:

Whatever we say, as long as it goes beyond mere interjection and minimal communication, is never an immediate and faithful presentation of what really occurs in us during that particular time of communication, but is a transformation of this inner reality, teleologically directed, reduced, and recomposed. With an instinct automatically preventing us from doing otherwise, we show nobody the course of our psychic processes in their purely causal reality and from the standpoints of logic, objectivity, and meaningfulness complete incoherence and irrationality. Always, we show only a section of them, stylized by selection and arrangement. We simply cannot imagine any interaction or social relation or society which are not based on this teleologically determined nonknowledge of one another. (Simmel, 1950: 312)

From this view, the necessary condition of our social experience is not transparency, or complete truth, but selectivity, filtering and non-disclosure. Lies are therefore extensions of a deeper and even more routine formation of talk and revelation, a styling and arrangement which operates through habitual concealment. Simmel does not quite go so far as to say explicitly that this stylisation, selection and arrangement constitute an aesthetic, but with due consideration to his insights into the aesthetics of modernity elsewhere (Frisby, 2013) it is fair, we think, to thus attribute to him the idea of an aesthetic of concealment which informs all interaction. Treating this aesthetic as ontologically prior to any given sequence of talk or self-presentation proves to be the key to our reinforcement of Simmel's broader position in the context of lying.

Indicative of his understanding that lies are not merely bad, or a separating force, Simmel notes that they might be absolutely crucial to the maintenance of at least some relations:

The lie is merely a very crude and, ultimately, often a contradictory form in which this necessity [of selectivity] shows itself. However often a lie may destroy a given relationship, as long as the relationship existed, the lie was an integral element of it. (Simmel, 1950: 316–317)

Curiously, having thus moved in quite a contrary direction to the canonical take on lying as bad and disconnecting, Simmel then seems to fall back in line with that more traditional account of what a lie is, arguing that it involves the liar 'hiding his true idea from the other' (Simmel, 1950: 312). This is the kind of claim that we see quite clearly in philosophical accounts (and not at all what we might expect of Simmel given his broader aesthetic argument). Before we move to adjust his position, though, we can try to read these claims as a consistent account. To do so, we would suggest that Simmel thinks we are able to know *at least some* discrete, clear truths about our inner worlds and to say them to others as simple, transparent statements. Perhaps we could say that we know these *by* selectively choosing, from amongst the chaos, uncertainty, confusion and contradiction, those things which can be given more logical or rational expression, but in the case of a lie choose not to express. This would still be a secondary action, though, based upon the aesthetic of concealment he identifies, and so it is hard to see how this resolves

into the definitional statement of lying being the 'hiding [of] his true idea from the other' when the ontologically prior action of stylisation and filtering requires this hiding of our inner experience as a habitual and necessary process. This generous reading falls short of his more sophisticated description of the relational and messy nature of inner life. In addition, as we now show, it becomes clearer that he is in something of a bind when he brings his discussion of lying into dialogue with changes in other social forms.

Simmel muses on lying's bearing on several different forms of sociation, including business relations and friendships, but here we focus on romantic ties. He describes intimacy as a kind of play of proximity, requiring both 'physical and psychological nearness' but also 'distances and intermissions', for although 'reciprocal knowledge conditions relationships positively . . . they also presuppose a certain ignorance and a measure of mutual concealment' (Simmel, 1950: 316–317). He seems interested in the way in which different relational forms allow different degrees of self-revelation, and in a consideration of the difference between friendship and love, arrives at the conclusion that 'for most people, sexual love opens the doors of the total personality more widely than does anything else. For not a few, in fact, love is the only form in which they can give their ego in its totality, just as to the artist the form of his art offers the only possibility for revealing his whole inner life.' (Simmel, 1950: 325). He goes on to argue that in the early stages of a romance, the partners desire to let themselves be 'completely absorbed by the other' (Simmel, 1950: 328), but that this risks them having nothing left to share, 'sobering' them up, and thereby depleting the passionate pursuit of the truths of each other's inner life: 'it paralyzes the vitality of relations and lets their continuation really appear pointless' (Simmel, 1950: 329). But, he argues, whilst most of us are likely to fall victim to this paradox of social inebriation, few have a kind of magical wellspring of self-creation, which allows them never to be fully quenched by the other's appetites:

Only those individuals can give themselves wholly without danger who cannot wholly give themselves, because their wealth consists in a continuous development in which every abandon is at once followed by new treasures. Such individuals have an inexhaustible reservoir of latent psychological possessions, and hence can no more reveal and give them away at one stroke than a tree can give away next year's fruits with those of the season. (Simmel, 1950: 329)

Here, Simmel adopts a spatial metaphor (the reservoir), which seems to imply that self-revelation has a manifest form (as a kind of liquid that could be stored, conveyed and consumed). Earlier, he uses the metaphor of absorption, as though someone's revelations could be soaked up, and 'sobriety', implying a kind of intoxication that might result from this consumption. These liquid metaphors make sense if we think Simmel is trying to understand truth and lies within the logic of a kind of conversational, desiring consumption of the other. As beautiful as the paradox of an inexhaustible consumption might be, it isn't at all clear why some special few should be so brimming over with self-creation while others starve for want of more self. If the aesthetic of concealment is truly an ontological condition of self-expression then we should all be able to craft more self-talk from that ceaselessly churning inner world.

This leaves Simmel in some degree of contradiction with regard to his more founding ontological position on revelation of inner experience, and his descriptions of concealment and love. Tantalisingly, in suggesting that love and art might be forms through



which total revelation of oneself can occur, he opens the door to a critique of his position through art forms, for in these we often find rich and evocative explorations of love, of the dances of deception between partners, and of the powers and constraints of art as a means of expressing oneself. We thus see this as a key juncture in Simmel's thinking that will allow us to revise his analysis if we look at an alternative way of understanding the connections between truth and self-expression; lying and concealment; love and art. We develop this response in the following section. But first, we continue with Simmel to explore what he has to say about lying with regard to social change.

Simmel's thinking on modernity in general often confronts the psychological consequences of changes in external life. As Frisby (1992: 60) puts it, all 'the central features of modernity which Simmel analyses in the "outer world", as it were, are expressed and manifest themselves in the "inner" life of individuals'. Simmel argues that we retreat from the chaos of modernity further into ourselves, to protect ourselves from the maddening spin of change and impermanence, bringing about his well-known claims regarding neurasthenia and the blasé attitude.

In writing about lying, Simmel (1950: 312–315) is also concerned with social change. He draws a comparison between what he terms 'pre-modern societies' and 'modern societies'. What he has in mind for the former are small village communities, with little diversification of labour, predominantly organised around communal living spaces in which people have lived for most of human history; for the latter he has in mind the urban metropolis as a mode of life in the 1800s, in which there is a rapid transformation in the diversity in forms of labour, where the capitalist mode of production and the money economy result in lives which are – to his mind – increasingly differentiated and isolated.

These shifts in widespread new forms of living, argues Simmel, bring about a transition in lying. He claims that in the pre-modern era, groups of people live too intimately and are too alike to be able to conceal much from each other or to lie to each other. The (revelation of) lies that are told, he says, must have very little impact on social cohesion because people's lives are too deeply entangled for deceptions to disrupt their bonds substantially. In the modern age, by contrast, he feels that lying has become more commonplace, even amongst people in the same family, for living arrangements produce greater privacy and diversification produces less shared understanding and personal similarity. As a result, he finds that lies become easier and more dangerous for social cohesion as society moves into the modern era, for they intensify diversification and individualisation and break the already stretched bonds of trust between weakly tied individuals.

On an immediate reading these claims look overly sweeping and he does not do nearly well enough to bring together his analysis of talk as always selective, filtered and arranged, what we termed his aesthetic of concealment, with his thinking on lying in modernity. Instead, it seems to be his thinking on modern aesthetics, as an over-abundance of shifting representations resulting in hyperstimulation, which dominates his approach to lying within social transformation. People can lie more easily and are perhaps impelled to lie more by these effects of modern living, pushing us ever more inwards as modernity encroaches further upon the psychological terrain. Here Simmel leaves little room for subtlety or the possibly balancing effects of other shifting social forms.

Whilst recent efforts to rehabilitate Simmel's work more broadly have tended to project his analyses forward in time, seeing him as a precursor or even as a prophet of

postmodernity, we instead look to Simmel's own precursors, to the early modern period, in which many of the social forms which Simmel is concerned with in modernity are beginning to develop. Shakespeare, as a similarly prominent figure writing about the twists and turns of everyday experience, also setting them against the background of social changes, makes for a promising interlocuter. In particular, his sonnet sequence is directly concerned with the questions of artistic expression, and these become entangled with his exploration of lying's connection to love in Sonnet 138. He is also a figure who is very much best understood within the shifting terrain of social change. In what follows, we explain Shakespeare's context, provide a close reading of Sonnet 138, and situate the sonnet form within the period. This helps us to see that Simmel's thinking on art and self-expression is incongruent with the artistic practices which preceded him. And this helps us to understand how the very questions Simmel sees as arising with modernity's social transformations are already under critical reflection, are subject to ironic and playful treatment, by the time Shakespeare's sonnets are published. As such, we can also reject some of Simmel's overly sweeping claims about how lies shift with social change, and find greater support for his more powerful discovery, the aesthetic of concealment.

### Sonnet 138 'I lie with her, and she with me'

Simmel looks to art for an understanding of how we might totally express ourselves, seeing art as a parallel to love in this regard. Of course, art forms of various sorts have been deeply interested in love's powers. And indeed, love is a central theme in early modern literatures, finding expression in devotional treatises, ballads, and in lyric poetry, especially the sonnet, which held a central role in the period's amorous articulations. Imported into England by 16<sup>th</sup>-century courtier poets from medieval Italian and French models, English sonnets drew in particular from Francesco Petrarca's (or 'Petrarch's') well-known and widely translated collection, or 'sequence', *Il Canzoniere* (c.1327). So the English sonnet form was, by the 1580s at least, a 'fashionable' (North, 2010 [2007]: 204) poetic modality. In particular it has become known for strikingly 'introspective' (Felch, 2020: 40) contemplations on the 'paradoxical nature' (Bates, 2011: 109) of romantic desire, 'and its interactions with the self and the wider social world' (Waller, 2011: 136).

Today, we are perhaps more familiar with the Petrarchan conventions of the Elizabethan love sonnet than any other lyric form from the early modern period. The heteronormative binary image of the lovesick speaker-poet and the unattainable beloved, have served as an enduring cultural touchstone for a now lost world of courtly love and erotic intrigue, shaping our contemporary understandings of early modern romantic experiences. However, while love is deeply embedded in the western sonnet tradition, our 'predisposition to admire [early modern] sonnets as love poems *par excellence*' (Moss, 2017: 253) has worked to suppress the playful opacities of the form as practised by some early modern sonneteers, and as understood by first readers.

Shakespeare's engagements with the sonnet form are particularly striking in this regard. His sequence of 154 sonnets, which was published by Thomas Thorpe under the pithy title, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, in 1609, 'marks a boldly decisive abandonment' (Duncan-Jones, 2003: 141) of the courtly love traditions of mistress worship and unfulfilled desire, traditions that had become, by the last decade of the reign of Elizabeth I

(1558–1603), predictable and cliché. Although specific lines from individual Shakespearean sonnets (such as ‘Shall I compare thee to a Summers day?’ from Sonnet 18, or ‘Let me not to the marriage of true mindes’ from Sonnet 116) have since ‘acquired a romantic reputation’ (Edmondson and Wells, 2020: 16), continuing to script our devotional encounters today (for instance, through wedding readings). *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* treats heterosexual love as something contemptuous and parochial. The sequence’s female love-object – the so-called ‘Dark Lady’ – is infamously treated as an object of misogynistic scorn and ‘sexual disgust’ (Schwarz, 2008: 742), rather than as an object of romantic idealisation. Conversely, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* fetishises a beautiful male youth, who is consistently addressed with longing and reverence, a figure who ‘becomes the object of . . . idolatrous admiration’, while ‘the woman becomes his dangerous adversary’ (Callaghan, 2007: 59). As a consequence, this sonnet sequence is remarkable in its portrayal of heterosexual love as an unsatisfactory, messy exploit, founded on complex relational patterns of manipulation, deceit, and self-deception.

Sonnet 138 (in full below, or see Duncan-Jones, 2010) is an excellent exemplification of these complex themes:

When my love swears that she is made of truth,  
 I do believe her, though I know she lies,  
 That she might think me some untutored youth  
 Unlearned in the world’s false subtleties.  
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,  
 Although she knows my days are past the best,  
 Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue;  
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.  
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?  
 And wherefore say not I that I am old?  
 O, love’s best habit is in seeming trust,  
 And age in love loves not t’have years told:  
 Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,  
 And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

Here, the sonnet-speaker (the persona that Shakespeare adopts) and the ‘Dark Lady’ tell each other lies. She ‘swears’ that she is ‘made of truth’ (that is, virtuous, and, punning on ‘maid’ to mean virginal), despite the implied suggestion that she is sexually active, or ‘unjust’; while the poet-speaker performs the role of a sexually naïve ‘youth’ to mask the fact that his ‘days are past the best’. In the second line, the sonnet-speaker confesses that he paradoxically permits himself to ‘believe’ the ‘lies’ she tells, and she, in turn, is understood to be doing the same, and may at least humour the poet-speaker’s own vanity. With this comes a shared, participatory investment in the illusionary power of concealments

and untruths: the projection of an outward show is love's 'best habit', performed on 'both sides' of the relationship. The word 'habit' is used in a double sense, evoking, on the one hand, a sartorial metaphor for clothing, attire, and outward dress, and, on the other, the more conventional sense of 'habit' as custom and compulsion. The implication is that everyday untruths and the strategic manipulation of appearances are love's defining feature rather than its rival, animating and perpetuating an erotic charge that bonds, with the 'lie' serving as a generative and productive force, uniting the sonnet's 'I' and 'her', the 'she' and the 'me'. This sonnet is, in other words, analysing deception as mutual and participatory, putting forth a scenario in which lying might reinforce, rather than undermine, a shared confidence in love's 'credit'. If Sonnet 138 can therefore be said to represent love, it is a particular brand of love that thrives on lies, and that makes more murky easy distinctions between the close and the separate, between concealing and revealing, knowing and not knowing. The sonnet's analysis of lying and love is powerfully evocative of Simmel's ontological position and his aesthetic of concealment. And, being art itself, the sonnet's analysis evidences a playfulness with the question of what can be expressed about love, what truths can be told about oneself. Its contradictions and paradoxes, puns and linguistic tricks remind us that the sonnet too cannot be simply trusted as an authentic, transparent reflection of the author's or speaker's self.

### Seeing 'on both sides' – Art, Lying and Self-Expression

Simmel's claim that love and 'art [offer] the only possibility for revealing' one's 'whole inner life' would therefore not have been straightforwardly recognised by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In a number of important ways, writers such as Shakespeare were not trained to create art as a means of pure self-expression about oneself, one's loves, desires, passions and so on, as Simmel would come to believe of such artworks.

To quote Smith, (2019) 'no literature of this period has the revelation of the artist's own inner feelings at its legible core'; instead, 'the primary impulse . . . behind early modern writing . . . is rhetorical rather than autobiographical' (2019: 313). Early modern scholars tend to read early modern forms of creative writing not within the frame of revealing the 'inner life' of the author but rather in dialogue with early modern Protestant-Humanist pedagogical programmes. These programmes were the soil in which were grown a number of highly influential Elizabethan male poets and dramatists, including Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593), Ben Jonson (1572–1637), and Shakespeare himself. These writers were likely to have been instructed in the liberal arts of poetry, history, moral philosophy, Latin grammar and rhetoric, skills that were designed to prepare them for 'active citizenship' (Peltonen, 2009: 239), but that also instilled a 'rhetorical view of life' that conceived of 'man as fundamentally a role player' (Lanham, 1976: 4).

Forms of Latinate rhetorical training in Elizabethan grammar schools included diction and ornamentation, essay writing, speech making, reverse translation, and commonplacing, a practice that involved gathering together *sententiae* from classical sources into miscellanies or commonplace books, which could then be redeployed in the compiler's own writings and day-to-day speech. Rhetorical handbooks, which by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were circulating widely in print, placed special emphasis on the interlinked exercise of *imitatio* (or *mimesis*), in which schoolboys were encouraged to assimilate the

writings of authoritative figures into their own writings, and to therefore ‘mimic . . . a host of passions that were not their own’ (Enterline, 2012: 8).

While Simmel understood creative ‘art’ as a potential vehicle for the sincere expression of one’s ‘whole inner life’, early moderns already understood artistic making in terms that sit more comfortably with Simmel’s commentary on the aesthetics of concealment. ‘*A poet is . . . a Maker, or a fainer: His Art, an Art of imitation, or faining*’, writes Ben Jonson (1641: 125), cutting to the heart of early modern poetry’s obsession with artifice, and to that culture’s reflexivity about lyric poetry, especially love poetry, as a ‘faining’ (that is, an imaginative *and* deceptive) performance.

The ‘measure of success’ for poets like Shakespeare ‘is not whether someone is in love but whether he can persuade the reader that he is’ (Alexander, 2010: 202). In this context, we might follow Guy-Bray (2021: 127) and read Sonnet 138 as a form of ‘metarepresentation’. It is an artful simulation of a love affair, packaged up in a metrically and rhythmically compressed little capsule, and it is at the same time about the central role of artful simulation in love. The ‘she’ and the ‘I’ of this sonnet engage in forms of mutual rhetorical manipulation, constructing self-flattering images of themselves for consumption by the other. This suspension of the ‘truth’ through the imitation and embodiment of idealised personas – ‘made of truth’, ‘untutored youth’ – is not, however, understood to be the death knell of their love affair, since ‘their playful falsehoods [secure] their affection’ (Shapiro, 2005: 199). As such, Simmel’s positive affirmation of the connecting power of some lies and concealments finds earlier affirmation in Shakespeare’s sonnet. Indeed, by finally turning on the ambiguities of the word ‘lie’ in the final couplet – a word that signifies both an untruth and that serves as a metaphor for sex – Sonnet 138 rounds off by promoting fabrication (or ‘faining’) as that which makes love, and love-making, possible.

We can move these ideas forward by turning to another prominent rhetorical technique that was codified in the early modern grammar school: *argumentum in utramque partem*, in which schoolboys were taught to persuasively argue on both sides of a question regardless of ‘personal feelings’ (Smith, 2019: 313). This practice ‘permeated virtually all areas of intellectual life’ (Altman, 1978: 43) in the Tudor and Elizabethan periods, and it ‘left its particular mark on much of the literature’ of those periods, too. While modalities of *imitatio* and commonplacing emphasised performative mimicry and the cross-hatching of voices as a central component of literary composition, *argumentum in utramque partem* structured habits of thought that accommodated alterity: ‘the ability’, to quote Pitts Donahoe (2018: 319), ‘to put oneself in the position of another and look around at the world from his or her point of view’. It’s another reminder that ‘neither Shakespeare nor any of his contemporary dramatists wrote autobiographically’ (Maguire and Smith, 2013: 71). Rather, like the ‘she’ and ‘me’ of Sonnet 138, who are bound together by a shared ability to hold contrary positions in mind – to ‘believe’ the ‘lies’ of the other, and to see ‘[o]n both sides’ – they were being trained to speak at odds, and to think bi-focally in terms of what might constitute ‘simple truth’.

We argue, then, that the difficulty we have in resolving Simmel’s comments on the aesthetics of talk and the powers of love are born out of the acceptance of a totalising impression of art’s function, which is not well aligned with his own ontological view of social life more broadly. The post-Romantic ideal of art – that it allows a perfect, sincere,

and total self-expression – is seen to reflect the ideal of romance itself, that love too allows such unbridled transparency. Simmel is enamoured by this possibility when he writes about truth and lies. He makes this case metaphorically, through a language of passionate inebriation and intoxication. But the literary artists working on sonnets in the early modern period, whose work went on to shape such images of love as wild self-revelation, often did not see love or art in this way. Understanding Shakespeare's critical interpretation of lying and love helps us to place our struggle with Simmel in context: it is his ideas about love and art that go awry, not his ideas about lying. That intoxication of love, the *sense* of giving oneself entirely, is a product of cultural history, and this seems to be very much attached to Simmel's understanding of art as a potentially unmediated expression of inner experience. As such, we resolve to treat his arguments about lying through his aesthetic of concealment, rather than his aesthetic of love: to see lies in Bacon's style, rather than Rembrandt's.

## Conclusion – Lying With Each Other

In Sonnet 138 we see how lying can be connecting even as it produces distance; how lies in the context of love seem sometimes to amplify attraction even as they conceal and obscure. This lyrical social analysis was set against a background of education in which artists like Shakespeare were being trained in modes of writing and self-composition that not only accepted the multiplicity of voice and self, and thus reflected on the power and limits of art as self-expression, but actively encouraged play with those concerns in the very forms they were training to write. This is beautifully exemplified in Sonnet 138's analysis. Simmel's sweeping claim that social transformations associated with modernity lead to more lies, which become more pernicious as inwardness intensifies, seems near-parochial by comparison with the complexity of Sonnet 138's playful approach to lying and truth.

There is much to be admired in Simmel's account, but his inclination towards sweeping descriptions of uniform social change does disservice to the complexity of social transitions with regard to inner experience and communication, which shape the transformation of lying as a social form as we move towards modernity. The early modern sonnet, and the content of individual sonnets, show that questions regarding the tension of concealment and self-revelation were already well developed by the 1600s. The early modern offers a period for study in which these questions are very much alive and *lived*, as we see in the way that Shakespeare's training in forms of writing leads to a deeply uncertain, playful and paradoxical account of what it means to be truthful or dishonest in love (and, thereby, in art). In this way, Simmel's attendance to change in lying is painted with too broad a brush. In one strand of thinking, he is concerned to show that revelation and concealment are inherent to all interaction, but that they are not immune to transformation, and by doing so provides much for our understanding of these phenomena, setting an important founding stone for sociological theorising about lying. Lying has to be understood against the background of shifting social forms. But we cannot focus on only those which seem to push us apart and lead us into psychological retreat. Lying, that seemingly most disconnecting of forces, in the context of sonnets, those seemingly most expressive works of art, comes into dialogue with love, that seemingly most connecting power. There



are thus tensions, contradictions and alignments as these phenomena mix, and we can now see inner experience and our expression of that inner life as a melting pot of uncertainty, bubbling over with expression and concealment, feigning and flattering, truths all mixed-up in denials, people brought together in true passion through self-deception and playful artifice. The sonnet already evidences the aesthetic of concealment in action, which Simmel later identifies sociologically, and which permeates all interaction, but in fleshing it out he falls into conceptual contradictions which need critical appraisal. This happens most especially as he tries to navigate his ontological, aesthetic position on talk with his own culturally embedded ideas about love and art.

We can take Simmel's fundamental insight, that lying shifts with respect to other social forms, but not his elaboration of *how* it shifts and thus we must also sacrifice his predictions for the future. These put aside, we have a clear picture of what Simmel can now contribute to renewing the sociology of lying. An understanding of lying as a social form which shifts over time in relational dynamics amongst the vast web of other mundane practices, and which is an extension of an underlying, ontologically prior and pervasive not-knowing that results from necessary forms of non-disclosure. This we term the aesthetic of concealment that conditions both our experiences of truth and untruth. From Shakespeare and from our reading of scholarship on the early modern we take the lesson that as these shifts in forms occur they are knowingly played with, and in that play, perhaps, they are adjusted, mediated and coped with. Simmel sees only retreat, but Shakespeare evidences the complex interplay of the private and public in that very discussion of shifting experiences of lying and disclosure. This makes for a better relational picture of lying than Simmel was able to achieve from his vantage point alone.

This relational approach also helps us to ask questions of lying that can be explored sociologically in any period. We have shown the value of the early modern as a sociological resource, offering a fascinating time period in which to examine sociology's founding conceptions, perhaps most importantly with regard to social change. The early modern provides sociologists with a way to trace and retrace some of what the modernist social theorists had come to take for granted, and thereby to problematise certain dimensions of their thinking.

But, questions of lying are perhaps most especially due in our contemporary era. For lying is currently problematised in various discourses concerned with misinformation, 'post-truth', Brexit, racism and far-right movements, social media and political spin. The list of practices entangled with untruth is increasingly extensive and has led to hyperbolic claims that truth is no longer the foundation of our society. But what we see in our adventure with Shakespeare and Simmel is that 'the simple truth' never was our 'best habit'. Instead, truth emerges from an aesthetic of concealment.

We can thus ask how does lying occur with respect to diverse social forms, and to changes in those forms, and with what ramifications for how truth is negotiated? And do so without seeing lying as an amoral offshoot of truth-telling; rather we see both as conditioned by the same aesthetic process. To answer that question, we must therefore attend to the contradictory and uncertain ways in which lying is transformed rather than being carried away by fears that lying and inwardness are only intensified and expanded as social change wears on. An extensive empirical exploration of lying within various social practices is required.

In addition, and contrary to the long-held account in philosophy of lying, which tends towards a rejection of lies on moral grounds for the damage they do to society and to relationships, we should ask how lying within particular relations and practices is involved in producing both connection and disconnection. Rather than assuming its role as a fragmenting and dislocating force, how might it both intensify self-disclosure and bonding even as it obfuscates knowledge of self and other?

We can also reject any underlying or explicit appeal to changing our social forms today in view to producing a society founded solely on truth and transparency. The discovery of the aesthetic of concealment cautions us against any such appeal and requires instead that we explore how it is that we navigate, individually, as groups and in culture writ-large, the always uncertain, always partial knowledge we have of ourselves and others. Any future in which we might overcome today's challenges of truth and its others will not be won through a simplistic appeal to founding society on transparency. To return to Sonnet 138, let us begin to ask how lying is entangled with the social order and not see it only as an interruption, let us look at how lying and truth are *both* fundamentally relational. How do we 'lie with' each other?

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### Author biographies

**Andrew Balmer** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Manchester and a member of the Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives. He was an editor of *Sociology*, a journal of the British Sociological Association, from 2018 to 2021. His research is concerned with lying, secrecy and lie detection. He has also written about a range of technologies and has developed work on interdisciplinarity and on creative research methodology.

**Michael Durrant** is a Lecturer in Early Modern Literature at Bangor University. He has written on print and textual transmission, materiality, and dissenting literatures of the 17th century. His first monograph, *The Dreaded Name of Henry Hills: The Lives, Transformations, and Afterlives of a Seventeenth Century Printer*, will be published by Manchester University Press in 2021. He is currently working on a project focusing on book use in early modern bibles and prayer books, an edited anthology of primary sources on the 'early modern weird', as well as ongoing collaborative research that examines the role and representation of lying and secrecy in the works of Shakespeare and other contemporary dramatists and poets.